Just Friends
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I worked for Mrs. Kenny throughout that entire hot, dry summer. The stone steps and walkway of her house, and the short stone wall surrounding her property, suffered from the assaults of uncounted winters and years of inexpert patching. The rocks comprising all these structures were rounded and abraded chunks of pink, white, or gray granite.

It was as though the animus of the glacier that deposited these stones on Mrs. Kenny's three-acre parcel had again grown restless, commanding the stones to resume their slow march southward. By the time I began work on her place, the steps and walkway were half-a-foot south of the front porch, and the stone fence and stiles no longer accurately marked the boundaries of her claim to the land.

These thoughts of the glacial age became a respite from the hot July wind. The stones themselves, at least those not directly beneath the daily arc of the sun, retained a bit of their coolness. I enjoyed working on the shaded sections of wall in the late afternoon, resting my forehead against the cold granite and leaving an oval of my sweat to seep slowly into its pores.

I could certainly have found easier work for the summer, but I enjoyed the struggle against these stones, rolling and shoving them back up the slight incline. It became a struggle against 1 their epochal inertia, rousing the stones and boulders out of their glacial sluggishness.

Mrs. Kenny was also quite pleasant both as an employer and a person. She seemed in no greater hurry than the stones she set me to work upon. She did not offer suggestions as to how I was to go about my work, and she did not stand at my elbow to see what I was up to every minute of the day. Mrs. Kenny also paid me fairly and promptly, at five o'clock on Fridays. I could have made more money working for some of the summer residents, but I needed a season away from their dickering and complaining.

In the evenings, when I was almost too exhausted to drive home, Mrs. Kenny invited me to spend a quiet hour with her relaxing on the screened-in front porch. She'd make me a sandwich with some of her potato salad and bring out a few bottles of ice-cold beer. The old lady matched me bottle for bottle. She found it amusing that I found it unsettling to see her snap her gray head back against the wicker chair and belt down the last of the bottle in a single quick swallow. Knowing I still had to drive home, she limited us to three bottles apiece, though I had no idea what she did after I left.

I thought it a little rude of me to be drinking her beer when she was, after all, paying me. So I brought along a six-pack one day, which I asked her to keep cool in the refrigerator. But she minced no words telling me that any brew not sold in brown bottles could not properly be called beer. She explained to me that clear glass and aluminum cans were altogether the wrong containers for such a sensitive beverage.

During the course of these after-work chats on the porch, I came to know the old lady. She listened to me just as I listened to her. She never offered advice, even when I complained about how my girlfriend seemed to be in such a hurry to slip the nuptial knot around my neck. She just told me how similar events had gone in her life, and I could make of that what I cared to. She talked of her husband only in this context, never out of maudlin sentimentality.

Mrs. Kenny insisted rather early on that I call her Ethel. I stumbled over it at first because I could hear my father telling me how disrespectful that was. With the change in name came a change in how we talked to one another.

I pressed on under the weight of that summer, but I always looked forward to that hour after I had finished work for the day. I never saw Ethel turn her television on and thought maybe it didn't work. No newspapers or magazines came to the house, and the one radio station she listened to played only Big Band tunes from the Forties. Nevertheless, Ethel managed to know what was going on in the world, as if she plucked it off the wind.

A small instance brought this clearly to my attention. I had saved my most worn and threadbare jeans for the days on which I had to mix up a trough full of mortar or for when I washed the completed sections of stonework with dilute acid. Ethel came out to warn me to be careful not to ruin my ratty old jeans completely, since they were probably more valuable than a brand new pair. Then she dismissed her remark by saying that I wasn't "one of those trendy fellows who ripped their clothes on purpose anyway."

Another time she asked me whether my girlfriend and I took any precautions against the HIV virus—meaning did I take any precautions. I know my jaw hung open long enough for a couple of lazy flies to buzz in and out. Then she quickly changed the subject: "None of my business anyway."

I could tell myself that the cause of my momentary shock arose from my preconceptions about what little old ladies ought to be talking about. I resolved to dispel them once and for all, but she still caught me off guard the next time.

On an evening in late August when I hung around later than usual waiting for a welcomed thunderstorm to pass, Ethel and I got on the subject of friends. I realized at once she was talking about us, so I let her know that I knew it. That always saves time.

"We're always so squeamish about what other people might be thinking of us, aren't we?"

she said. “We see an older gentleman with a young lady on his arm—in a restaurant, for instance—and we can’t stop ourselves from jumping to conclusions.”

I saw that she had changed the roles so I wouldn’t be so self-conscious during our little talk.

“You’re right,” I said. “It’s almost like a knee-jerk.”

“Most people are going to think the young lady is a gold-digger or the distinguished gentleman is a shameless lecher. The more generous might assume they are just what they appear to be: an old man and his grand-daughter, though most will persist in thinking of them as the ‘bimbo and the dirty old man’.”

I could not help laughing at the way in which these words slipped so casually from her wrinkled lips.

“But who,” Ethel went on, “would even consider it possible that they were just friends?”

“Probably not a soul,” I said. I wanted to add some example of my own, but nothing appropriate came to mind at first. Then I did think of something and began relating it to Ethel. I took another sip of beer, slowly, to show that it didn’t make me anxious to reveal myself to her.

“A couple of weeks ago an old college buddy of mine came through town and looked me up. We went out for a couple of beers, but then my friend just wanted to go walking around town. We had a lot to catch up on. So we walked and talked and went around in circles.

“Without thinking about it I suddenly hung my arm over his shoulder and around his neck. I almost felt like kissing him. Just glad to see him, I guess. All at once I pulled my arm away. It was like I had seen us through the eyes of somebody crossing the street toward us. ‘Hell, a couple of gay guys in the business of flaunting it.’ Or else it was, ‘Get a load of those two drunks over there. They can’t even stand up without leaning on one another, they’re so smashed.’ It kind of occurred to me then, who was going to believe we were just friends? I probably wouldn’t think that myself,” I said, laughing.

We went on talking for nearly another hour that evening. I didn’t feel like going home, even though I knew Alison was probably trying to call me. She’d likely ask me again, “Why do you spend so much time hanging around that old lady? You hoping she’s going to put you in her will or something?” I knew I couldn’t make Alison understand. I’d probably blurt out something like, “I don’t know. At least she doesn’t get me all uptight.” And we would slide straight into an argument.

I finally came to my last day of work at Ethel’s place. I knew I would miss knowing just what faced me each day in the thoughtless way of slipping on a comfortable pair of old work boots.

That day I washed the final section of the stone wall and scraped up the last of the gravel and sand from Ethel's driveway. She hadn't taken out the spotless high-finned Buick all summer. She had her groceries delivered, and there was nowhere else she wanted to go. But she had promised me a ride in the old behemoth. I kept washing the wall over and over like I didn't want to finish up the job.

Ethel finally came out with my paycheck and a bottle of beer. The thunderstorm of a few nights earlier had brought relief only until the next morning, so I appreciated the cold beer. I gathered up the bucket of mild acid wash and my sweat-soaked shirt.

"I know I promised you I'd make a really nice meal for tonight, Brian, but I'll be honest: I just don't feel up to it. The last place I want to be is in a hot kitchen. I thought we'd go on up to Carlson's. You can order whatever you like."

"Oh, that's all right. I'd have to go home to change, and by then I'd probably fall asleep at the table on you. We can make it another time."

"At my age you don't take 'another time' quite so much for granted. Anyhow, you look fine. Carlson's is just for the summer trade. Nobody's dressed up."

"Yeah, maybe these jeans don't look so bad, but my shirt is ready to walk away by itself."

"Listen, you just go on in the house and take a shower and I'll find you one of my husband's shirts. It ought to fit you fine. He was broad-shouldered just like you."

I was too hot and tired to argue with Ethel. While I had used the bathroom countless times over the summer, I'd never taken a bath there, preferring to wash up at the end of the day from the hose alongside the garage. But I got over my unease once I stood under the cool stream of water.

Ethel had one of her husband's white dress shirts hung over the back of a kitchen chair. The edge of the collar was a little dingy. A gray stripe of fine dust ran along the top of both shoulders where the wire hanger had left its imprint. But it was a better shirt than any I owned, and it felt cool and freshly- starched, even though I knew Mr. Kenny had been dead for five years.

"It's so nice to see a man putting on a clean shirt," Ethel said. "I've missed that."

Her comment made me so self-conscious I felt certain I'd button it up wrong.

"Of course, I prefer seeing a man take his shirt off," she said. There was a playful glint in her eyes that told me she had been, and probably still was, a woman with a great potential for mischief. I wondered what Mr. Kenny had been like.

Ethel locked up the house and we went out to the garage. She let the old Buick coast out in neutral. She seemed nervous about maneuvering that land yacht down the narrow drive, but I knew she wanted to sit behind the wheel, so I simply held my breath quietly.

It was cooler near Carlson's, which stood high enough on a sandy bluff overlooking the bay to collect the evening breeze undiminished by the woods encroaching on the other three sides. The place was filled with older couples in polyester slacks and crisp pastel shirts and blouses. I felt the training of their eyes upon Ethel and me. Could we be grandmother and grandson? Or was I just a gigolo and she the lonely widow with a horde of unspent cash and stock certificates in a shoebox?

I smiled at everyone. I felt as though I had already practiced defending myself against their thoughts and thoughtless stares. My smiling unnerved them, and they bent back over their plates and cocktails.

Ethel surreptitiously handed me a wad of dollar bills from her purse. I supposed she thought I would feel more comfortable by at least appearing to pay for our meal. Or had she suddenly become concerned with propriety in public places? I wondered why it had taken me until then to realize that she might feel just as self-conscious as I did.

I got along with Ethel so well because there was nothing maternal in her attitude, and she treated me as a full-fledged adult in spite of the half-century she had on me. She did not have to tell me to order what I wanted, or to eat every last radish I had taken from the salad bar. She was as easy and uncritical as an old college friend, even in public.

Ethel knew several of the couples in Carlson's that evening. They took turns coming over to our table to acknowledge that they had seen her. Since they knew her, they did not have to wonder whether I was one of the grandsons. Ethel and her husband had had no children.

I would have been content to have her introduce me simply as the guy who had sweated over her stonework all summer. Instead she called me her friend, without appending the qualifier that was somehow an admission of a guilty conscience: "just" a friend. I had no idea what her acquaintances thought, and did not care.

I ordered two beers in chilled steins, we had dinner, and then spent the evening chattering away until the waitresses began setting all the vacant tables with obvious flourish and considerable rattling of plates and clanging of silverware. I had relaxed to the point of having forgotten the time. I was no longer sure why I had been in such consternation about ever seeing Ethel again from time to time. She was not fixing the place up to sell it. She had expressed her intention to die in that house and I believed she would.

Ethel insisted that I drive home because her night vision was not what it ought to be. I got the land yacht parked in the garage and climbed into my pick-up.

"Friends don't need invitations or excuses," she hollered down to me from the reconstructed steps.

"Yeah, I know, Ethel. Good night. And thanks for dinner."

"What I mean is, you're forgetting your wheelbarrow."

"Oh," I said. "Well, I'll be working on hauling in piers for the next few days. Summer people closing up early. I'll pick it up next week."

"That's all right," she said. "No hurry. The neighbors think it's a lawn ornament by now anyway."

"Who cares what the neighbors think?" I asked, and waved good-bye to her.

The porch light blinked off, and I eased the pick-up down the drive. Mr. Kenny's shirt still felt crisp and dry when I got home, and I hung it over a chair to let the wrinkles fall out.